

## WHAT'S THAT SMELL?

By Felicia Yearwood, SOCR

Fragrances or scented cleansers can cause unpleasant reactions such as a mild headache or simple irritation for many people.

But for a growing number, the reaction can be much more serious. Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) affects people who have developed an acute sensitivity to various chemicals in the environment. Triggering agents can include cleaners, pesticides, wall and floor coverings, and building materials, as well as personal care products, fragrances, and deodorizers. Because fragrances are often composed of several chemicals, it can be difficult to determine if the sensitivity is caused by one chemical or a combination of chemicals.

People with MCS experience a vast range of debilitating physical reactions, including breathing problems, dizziness, muscle pain or stiffness, memory loss, changes in heart rhythm, and rashes. The common factor is that the reaction, whatever the type, is very strong and disabling. Some people with fragrance sensitivity are considered to have a disability under the ADA and the federal Fair Housing Act due to the severity of their reaction. People with less severe reactions may not be considered to have a disability. Once a person has developed fragrance irritation, it is likely that the sensitivity will grow over time and with repeated exposure.

Additional research is needed to determine how and why individuals develop an acute sensitivity to certain chemicals, and what can be done to prevent or treat it. Because the condition is not well understood, avoidance of pollutants and toxicants is key for people with MCS.

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights encourages property managers, employers and service providers to ensure that their facilities are accessible to persons with a wide range of disabilities, including MCS. One positive step is to develop a fragrance-free office policy statement, such as:

"Please refrain from using perfumes, colognes, scented hair products, aftershave, scented lotion, or air fresheners in the office, as the use of such products may trigger allergic reactions or create other health problems."

You can find more fragrance-free policies at the [Canary Report \(www.thecanaryreport.org/resources/fragrance-free-policies/\)](http://www.thecanaryreport.org/resources/fragrance-free-policies/), and general information at: [Multiple Chemical Sensitivity \(www.multiplechemicalsensitivity.org/\)](http://www.multiplechemicalsensitivity.org/) and [Massachusetts Nurses Association \(www.massnurses.org/health-and-safety/articles/chemical-exposures/p/openItem/1347\)](http://www.massnurses.org/health-and-safety/articles/chemical-exposures/p/openItem/1347).

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### Checklist for developing a fragrance-free policy:

- Determine the extent of the issue by asking residents and employees whether they have sensitivity to odors, and ask for their suggestions to cope with the problem.
- Educate all residents and employees about why the policy is needed before its implementation. Include brochures or flyers in rent statements and payroll envelopes, publish articles in building newsletters, or offer presentations about health concerns related to scents.
- Inform all residents and employees of the policy when it is finalized and make sure they know their rights and responsibilities. Reinforce that the policy is being implemented to prevent medical concerns – not merely because of a dislike of a certain smell.
- Clarify that the policy applies to everyone, including visitors.
- Notify residents and employees before painting walls, waxing floors, shampooing carpets, or spraying chemicals so that affected people can seek additional information or make appropriate arrangements.
- Include notice of your scent-free policy on appointment cards, stationery, room booking notices, postings, etc.
- Post "Scent-Free" signs.
- Review the policy periodically and update based on new knowledge.